

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

**CABINET EXECUTIVE
23 January 2024**

REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Pete Roberts
Portfolio Holder for a Learning Powys

REPORT TITLE: Irfon Valley C.P. School – Consultation Report

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

- 1.1 Further to the decision made by Cabinet on the 24th October 2023, the Council has carried out consultation on the following proposal:
- To close Irfon Valley C.P. School from the 31st August 2024, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to inform Cabinet members of the responses received to the consultation and to determine whether or not to proceed with the statutory process to close the school.
- 1.3 The report is supported by the following appendices:
- Appendix A – Consultation Document
 - Appendix B – Consultation Report
 - Appendix C – Minutes of meetings with Governors and Staff
 - Appendix D – Updated Impact Assessments

2. Background

- 2.1 Irfon Valley C.P. School is a small English-medium primary school, located in the village of Garth in the Builth Wells catchment in Mid-Powys.
- 2.2 Irfon Valley C.P. School has a formal Collaborative Partnership Agreement with Ysgol Dolafon, Llanwrtyd, based on the Collaboration between Maintained Schools in Wales (2008) Act. This means that there is a formal agreement between the schools to share a headteacher. This agreement comes to an end this academic year.
- 2.3 Pupil numbers at Irfon Valley C.P. School have decreased significantly over recent years. Current pupil numbers at the school are as follows¹:

¹ Teacher Centre, September 2023

	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Irfon Valley C.P. School	1	6	4	0	1	2	5	19

2.4 In the Summer of 2022, the Council updated and relaunched its Strategy for Transforming Education. In July 2023, the school's governing body wrote to the Council, outlining their concerns about the impact of the decrease in pupil numbers on the school's educational and financial sustainability. Following the initial communication with the governing body, the Council carried out an options appraisal exercise to consider options for the school and identify a preferred option.

2.7 On the 24th October 2023, Cabinet considered a proposal paper in respect of Irfon Valley C.P. School and agreed to commence consultation on the following:

'To close Irfon Valley C.P. School from the 31st August 2024, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.'

2.8 Consultation has subsequently been carried out, as agreed by Cabinet.

The Consultation Period

2.9 Consultation on the proposal to close Irfon Valley C.P. School commenced on the 26th of October 2023 and ended on the 7th of December 2023.

2.10 The consultation document was available on the Council's website throughout the consultation period. The document was also distributed to stakeholders as required by the School Organisation Code (2018). The consultation document that was issued is attached as Appendix A.

2.11 Consultees were asked to respond to the consultation by either completing the online consultation form, filling in a paper copy of the form and returning it to the Transforming Education Team, or by writing to the Transforming Education Team.

2.12 During the consultation period, meetings were held with staff and governors of Irfon Valley C.P. School. The minutes of these meetings are attached as Appendix C, and the issues raised in the meetings are included in the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

2.13 In addition, the Headteacher of Irfon Valley C.P. School spoke with pupils about the proposal. Their comments are included in the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

Consultation Responses

- 2.14 45 respondents completed the online response form which was available on the Council's website. In addition, 1 respondent completed a paper version of the response form. 2 other written responses were received, including a response from Estyn.
- 2.15 Estyn's response to the consultation is provided on page 14 of the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

Consultation Findings

- 2.17 The findings of the consultation are provided in full in the Consultation Report (Appendix B) and are summarised below.
- 2.18 Of the 46 respondents that completed the online and paper version of the response form, 78.26% indicated that they were associated with Irfon Valley C.P. School.
- 2.19 The issues raised in the written responses to the consultation and those raised in the consultation meetings are listed in the Consultation Report (Appendix B), from page 18 onwards, along with the Council's response to those issues.
- 2.20 The issues raised relate to the following headings:
1. Comments about Irfon Valley C.P. School
 - 1.1 General positive comments about the school
 - 1.2 Comments about quality of provision at Irfon Valley C.P. School
 - 1.3 Comments about extra-curricular activities available at the school
 - 1.4 Comments about the staff at Irfon Valley C.P. School
 - 1.5 Comments about the school's role in the community
 - 1.6 Comments about the school's small size
 - 1.7 Other comments
 2. Comments about the impact on pupils
 3. Comments about the impact on pupils belonging to protected characteristic groups
 4. Impact on staff
 5. Impact on the community
 6. Impact on families
 7. Impact on early years provision
 8. Comments about housing developments in the local area
 9. Comments about travel/transport arrangements
 - 9.1 Concern about additional travel
 - 9.2 Comments about the Council's Transport Policy
 10. Comments about other schools

11. Comments about small/rural schools

- 11.1 Positive comments about small / rural schools
- 11.2 Concerns about larger schools

12. Criticism of the council

13. Comments about the process

- 13.1 Comments about the timing
- 13.2 Comments about consultation meetings
- 13.3 Comments about consultation with pupils
- 13.4 Other comments

14. Comments about the documentation

15. Alternative options

- 15.1 Keep the school open
- 15.2 Develop the provision at the school
- 15.3 Federation
- 15.4 Merge with another school
- 15.5 Establish a Welsh-medium school
- 15.6 Close a different school
- 15.7 Other suggestions

16. Comments in support of the proposal

3. Advice

- 3.1 Based on the findings of the consultation, and further assessment of the options in accordance with the requirements of the School Organisation Code in terms of the Presumption Against Closure of Rural Schools, the advice of officers is that the Council should proceed with the proposal to close Irfon Valley C.P. School by publishing a Statutory Notice.
- 3.2 The reasons for the proposal are:
 - Would address the issue of low pupil numbers at Irfon Valley C.P. School.
 - Would reduce the Council's overall surplus capacity in primary schools
 - Revenue saving to the Council
 - Pupils would attend a larger school where they would be part of a larger cohort of pupils
- 3.3 It is anticipated that the Statutory Notice would be published in February 2024, and that a further report, summarising any objections received, would be considered by Cabinet in March / April 2024.

3.4 The target date to implement the closure of Irfon Valley C.P. School is 31st August 2024.

4. Resource Implications

4.1 The amount of funding provided to schools is driven by the funding formula. Any change to the formula funding provided will impact on the Council's revenue budget. Based on the current formula, it is estimated that implementation of the proposal would result in annual revenue savings to the Council of around £75k. This overall figure comprises a potential saving on Schools' delegated funding of over £121k and estimated additional transport costs of £46k. The proposal is expected to have no impact on the costs of delivering a catering service.

4.2 Irfon Valley C.P. School is currently projecting a carry forward surplus of £30.6k at the end of financial year 2023-24, which changes to an escalating cumulative deficit, projected to be £121.5k by 31 March 2026, if the school remains open.

4.3 The Scheme for Financing Schools also states the following in section 3.7.2:

'In order to ensure effective stewardship of the resources available to schools, the Authority may impose additional restrictions on a school scheduled to close, including but not limited to:

- Restriction of expenditure to agreed plans
- Removal of powers of virement'

The Council and the governing body of the school have been working on a draft agreement which includes spending restrictions. The budget position by 31 August 2024 is estimated to be as follows:

	2023-24 £	2024-25 £
In year Surplus/(Deficit)	(25,151)	(29,188)
Bfwd Balance	55,573	30,602
Cfwd Balance	30,602	1,414

4.4 Should the school remain open beyond 31 August 2024, then it will move into the escalating cumulative deficit position set out in paragraph 4.2 above.

4.5 Based on the current school condition data report it would cost approximately £248,520 plus VAT to bring the building up to current standards, however this figure is expected to rise due to construction industry inflation experienced. If the proposal is implemented this cost would be avoided.

- 4.6 Implementation of the proposal would require involvement from a number of service areas, including staff from the Schools Service, Finance, HR and ICT. These service areas will be kept informed of the development of the proposal throughout the statutory process.
- 4.7 Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and supports the recommendation.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 Legal: To follow.
- 5.2 The Head of Legal Services and the Monitoring Officer has commented as follows: To follow.

6. Climate Change & Nature Implications

- 6.1 Implementation of the proposal would impact on travel arrangements for pupils currently attending Irfon Valley C.P. School. This could have a negative environmental impact, as additional home to school transport would need to be provided to transport pupils to their nearest alternative school. However, implementation of the proposal would also mean that the Council would no longer need to run the Irfon Valley school site. This would result in a reduction in the use of heating and electricity amongst other factors.

7. Data Protection

N/A

8. Comment from local member(s)

Cllr Bryan Davies (Llanafanfawr with Garth):

'I was disappointed that the pupil numbers in the school fell so quickly over the summer period causing the authority to undertake a review of the schools viability.

During the consultation period I had discussions with members of the community who in general were very disappointing but understanding of the Councils proposal to close the school at the end of the current school year.

The staff at the school are excellent as detailed in the last Estyn report and I hope that the authority will support the staff in gaining new positions in other schools / services.'

9. Impact Assessment

- 9.1 An initial impact assessment was considered by Cabinet on the 24th of October 2023.
- 9.2 In addition, a range of draft impact assessments were produced as part of the consultation documentation. These included an Integrated Impact Assessment, an Equalities Impact Assessment, and a Community Impact Assessment.
- 9.3 These draft impact assessments have been updated to reflect issues raised during the consultation period, and are attached in Appendix D.
- 9.4 The Overall Summary from the Impact Assessment is as follows:

The aim of the proposal is to improve the educational provision for learners. However, whilst this impact assessment has identified some positive aspects, in particular relating to ensuring the best strategic management of the Powys schools estate, the assessment has also identified some negative aspects. These primarily relate to the impact on the community of Garth due to loss of educational provision from the village.

10. **Recommendation**

- i) To receive the Consultation Report in respect of the proposal to close Irfon Valley C.P. School.
- ii) To approve the publication of a statutory notice proposing closure of Irfon Valley C.P. School School from the 31st August 2024, with pupils to transfer to their nearest alternative schools.
- iii) To ensure that the school complies with section 3.7.2 of the Scheme for Financing Schools as follows:

'In order to ensure effective stewardship of the resources available to schools, the Authority may impose additional restrictions on a school scheduled to close, including but not limited to:

- *Restriction of expenditure to agreed plans*
- *Removal of powers of virement'*

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